

## Unwanted sexual attention in the night-time economy

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**Unwanted sexual attention in the Night Time Economy: behaviors, safety strategies and conceptualizing “feisty femininity”**

## **Abstract**

Almost nothing is known about “unwanted sexual attention” and women’s navigation of it when in bars and nightclubs. Using focus group discussions this article addresses that gap. It develops knowledge of the behaviors that constitute unwanted, the safety strategies used to manage them and examines how these practices underpin gender performance in night-time spaces: environments renowned for the dilemmas they pose to women. We then use these data to develop the concept “feisty femininity” to highlight a neglected form of femininity that overtly resists unwanted encounters. This femininity can arguably play a role in efforts aimed at ending gendered violence.

Sexual comments, groping and other unwanted encounters are key features of the time 18-29 year olds spend in licensed venues (Christmas & Seymour, 2014).<sup>1</sup> While “unwanted sexual attention” (Fileborn, 2012) has received recognition within Australian (Fileborn, 2012, 2016) and North American contexts (Graham, Bernards, Abbey, Dumas, & Wells, 2017; Kavanaugh, 2013; Snow, Robinson, & McCall, 1991), it remains practically unexamined within UK and wider international literature (see Nicholls, 2018 as an exception). While work has examined women’s perceptions of safety when in the Night Time Economy (NTE) (Brooks, 2011, 2014; Sheard, 2011), this has centered on fears around drink spiking and rape, despite unwanted touching and harassment being more pervasive (Beynon, McVeigh, McVeigh, Leavey, & Bellis, 2008; Graham et al., 2017).

Although the frequency of unwanted sexual attention is being documented in the UK (Christmas & Seymour, 2014; Drinkaware, 2016), almost nothing is known about how incidents are perceived, the point at which they become unwanted and how they are negotiated and struggled with. This article fills that gap, drawing on focus group discussions with 31 women students who used NTE spaces in Liverpool, England, to do so. In the paper we ask: what form does unwanted sexual attention in youth-oriented NTE venues take? What strategies do women employ to manage it and how do the behaviors associated with those responses contribute toward performances of femininity that are contradictory and dilemmatic (Griffin, Szmigin, Bengry-Howell, Hackley, & Mistral, 2012)? We also ask whether, within the restrictive NTE regime, there is scope for women to resist unwanted encounters and do gendered drinking differently.

In answering these questions we generate original knowledge around the contours and scope of unwanted sexual attention. We then use these data to advance theoretical understanding of gender performance in night-time spaces. Here, we develop the concept of “feisty femininity” in order to highlight an overtly resistant form of femininity that exists

within the NTE, but which has not yet been categorized. We maintain that feisty femininity will have a role to play in efforts aimed at eradicating gendered violence, with university institutions being well situated to nurture its expression.

Although men are not immune to unwanted attention (Drinkaware, 2016), research indicates that when women are the perpetrators, men are less likely to describe those behaviors as “unpleasant” (Christmas & Seymour, 2014, p. 10). While such responses may be influenced by performances of hetero-masculinity, and we acknowledge the need to understand men’s experiences further (and are developing work to do so), this article focuses solely on women’s unwanted encounters, at the hands of men. We begin by defining “unwanted sexual attention” before outlining the difficulties women face when doing gender (West & Zimmerman, 1987) in drinking spaces. We then examine the literature on unwanted sexual behaviors in bars and nightclubs in order to locate the current study and center our research questions.

### **Defining Unwanted Sexual Attention**

We adopt Fileborn’s (2012, p. 244) definition of unwanted sexual attention to mean “any unwanted advances or behavior that participants interpreted as being sexual in nature and intent.” This definition is wide enough to capture experiences considered harmful and threatening but which may not meet legal definitions of sexual offenses (Kelly, 1988). For example, in England and Wales unwanted sexual attention may amount to a sexual assault but only if it involves non-consensual *sexual touching* of the *body and/or clothing* (see section 3 Sexual Offences Act 2003). This would include, for example, rubbing up against someone and tapping them on the bottom. However, verbal forms of unwanted attention such as whistling, sexual comments or “catcalling”, as well as non-verbal acts that include looking someone up and down, making sexual gestures and asking for sexual favors, are not

considered to be sexual offenses. While behavior amounting to harassment and stalking is criminalized (see Protection from Harassment Act 1997), these offenses require the offender to engage in a course of conduct which is defined as two or more incidents. One-off unwanted and non-physical sexual advances therefore fall outside the scope of the criminal law. This highlights the blurred boundaries between criminal and non-criminal categories and problematizes the idea that unwanted sexual attention is easily compartmentalized or defined.

### **Femininity in Sexualized Drinking Spaces**

NTE governance forces are complicit in the cultivation of a “transgressive [night-time] ambience” in order to attract clientele (Hobbs, Hadfield, Lister, & Winlow, 2005, p. 93). These forces impact the potential for unwanted encounters, the tactics deployed to manage them and wider gender performance when in nightlife settings. For example, it is now standard practice for youth-focused drinking venues to enforce sexualized norms of dress and behavior through the hiring of attractive staff, choice of in-house “entertainment” and use of sexualized advertising and innuendo to market venue nights and drinks (Gunby, Carline, & Taylor, 2017; Home Office, 2008; Kavanaugh, 2013). Such practices function to shape and reinforce gender difference, utilize the promise of sexual interaction to recruit consumers and position women as targets to be pursued (Grazian, 2007; Snow et al., 1991).

Indeed, the marketing industry has “learnt how to harness the power of consumer goods to shape identities in calculated conceptions of lifestyle and desire” (Radcliffe & Measham, 2014, p. 347). Going out is a spending priority for many young people with considerable resource invested in deciding where to go, with whom and in cultivating the “right look.” The right look is, however, notably difficult for women to attain with marketing approaches drawing on post-feminist narratives that emphasize the potential for empowerment through (hetero)sexual assertiveness, the commodification of one’s appearance and the construction

of an active and desiring sexual self (Bailey, Griffin, & Shankar, 2015; McRobbie, 2007). Young women are encouraged to style femininities that are “sassy” and independent (but not feminist), “up for it” and for getting drunk alongside the men (but not “drinking like a man”), that are agentically sexy and “classy” but never “sluttish” or “trashy” (Atkinson and Sumnall, 2016; Griffin et al., 2012, p. 184; Kovac & Trussell, 2015, p. 201).

Such femininities resonate with Connell’s (1987) description of “emphasized femininity”, a form oriented toward accommodating the interests and desires of men. Femininity is constructed in the shadows of women’s overall subordination and therefore polarizes around compliance and resistance to male domination (Connell, 1987). In light of compliance having received greater cultural support, femininities that conform to men’s desire for titillation, ego-stroking and sexual receptivity are likely to proliferate at the expense of others.

Despite the promise of autonomy and power offered within post-feminist marketing, patriarchal sexual double standards remain at the center of traditional discourses of femininity. These emphasize the importance of narrow, (hetero)sexual conceptualizations of attraction, of heavy drinking still being a marker of masculinity and the importance of respectable femininity where a “good” sexual reputation is paramount (Bailey et al., 2015; Griffin et al., 2012; Skeggs, 1997). Women who transgress respectable standards risk vilification. For example, women are judged unattractive and unfeminine if they fail to show restraint in their drinking (Bailey et al., 2015; Day, Gough, & McFadden, 2004; Skeggs, 1997, 2005) and they work hard at distancing themselves from the spectra of the “drunken slut” (Griffin et al., 2012, p. 187). Respectable femininity is classed and racialized, limiting who can occupy the space (Miller, 2008; Nicholls, 2018; Skeggs, 1997). Women therefore participate in a complex climate of contradictions when in drinking environments, linked to the tensions between traditional and post-feminist forms of femininity. Femininity, in this

sense, is a “profoundly contradictory and dilemmatic space which appears almost impossible for girls or young women to inhabit” (Griffin et al., 2012, p. 184). Nights out are fraught with dilemmas, despite women finding the means to navigate their evenings through acts of subverting, parodying, conforming to and reproducing hetero-patriarchal performances. Throughout, fun, risk and danger intertwine in an uneasy embrace (Bailey et al., 2015; Griffin et al., 2012; Nicholls, 2017; 2018; Snow et al., 1991).

### **Women’s Experiences and Responses to Unwanted Sexual Attention**

Between 83-102 million (45-55%) women across 28 EU member states report having experienced unwanted sexual behavior both within and outside the work context (Latcheva, 2017). In terms of the latter, women experience a plethora of unwanted sexual encounters when in drinking venues ranging from rape, through to the more common occurrence of sexualized comments, staring and touching (Christmas & Seymour, 2014; Fileborn, 2012; Graham et al., 2017; Parks, Miller, Collins, & Zetes-Zanatta, 1998). Such experiences are reportedly becoming a “normalized” element of a night out for young women (Christmas and Seymour, 2014; Kavanaugh, 2013), with North American research identifying that 75% of 153 19-29 year olds had been touched or unrelentingly pursued when in bars and clubs (Graham et al., 2017). In a survey of 2,004 UK students, 54% of women reported experiencing unwanted touching or comments with half identifying that such behaviors occurred every time or the majority of times they went out (Drinkaware, 2016). Fileborn’s (2012) research on licensed venues in Melbourne, Australia, identified that young women were frequently touched by men when dancing, “accidentally” groped when walking through crowded bars and experienced verbalized sexual harassment. The latter was often perceived more fear inducing than physical touching - implicating that conceptualizations of unwanted sexual attention must remain fluid and non-hierarchical.



Responses to unwanted attention are multiple and complex. While some women report incidents to not be a “big deal” (Fileborn, 2012, p. 250) other reactions include annoyance, anger, fear and distress, as well as the development of practices aimed at deflecting and rejecting the behavior. For example, reducing the amount one drinks and avoiding establishments with a “bad vibe or atmosphere” (Fileborn, 2016, p. 113). Nicholls (2017, p. 267) highlights the way in which women manage gendered risks by “dulling it down” and rejecting “sexy” dress codes. Thus, while pressures to conform to agentically sexy standards exist (Griffin et al., 2012; Kovac & Trussell, 2015), adherence can make women “hypervisible” and in turn, attract unwanted attention (Miller, 2008; Nicholls, 2018).

These “safety strategies” are not just produced at the individual citizen level but also collectively and relationally. For example, the use of informal “buddy systems” where friends take turns in looking after, and out for, other friends and strangers. This may include watching drinks, intervening in incidents and encouraging the group to leave a venue (Brooks, 2011; Graham et al., 2017; Kovac & Trussell, 2015; Nicholls, 2018; Snow et al., 1991). Such approaches could be argued to embody sexual violence campaign narratives, which under the guise of prevention have long offered women risk reduction solutions, including keeping a vigilant eye on friends (Carline, Gunby, & Taylor, 2018; Gunby et al., 2017; Vera-Gray, 2018). However, as Kovac and Trussell (2015) argue, a collaborative spirit exists amongst women when it comes to safety with social support and friendship being dominant features of research focused on women and leisure. This suggests that risk reduction strategies are informed by more than neoliberal safety narratives (Garland, 1996), but also a wider concern for women.

However, these strategies and the work underpinning them impinge on full and equitable access to NTE spaces, acting on the body as disciplining techniques that curtail freedom of movement and (re)produce female vulnerability (Brooks, 2011; Campbell, 2005;

Vera-Gray, 2018). This is especially problematic when nights out offer respite from the stress and sobriety of the working week (Hobbs, Hadfield, Lister, & Winlow, 2003). Women's mobility in the public sphere is impacted, serving to control and constituting a form of injustice. As Fraser (2008) argues, participatory parity is the norm against which to evaluate how just or otherwise social arrangements are. However, Brooks (2011) highlights that safety strategies serve to minimize or control the potential for unwanted encounters and render an unpredictable environment more predictable. This allows women to resist their fears and participate more fully in nightlife. In adopting this lens safety is considered a state that can be accomplished, enabling women to continue to enjoy night-time leisure despite the glare of unwanted behavior. Women are positioned as more autonomous agents, able to navigate constraining structures, rather than simply being the recipients of them (Green, 1998).

In reviewing this literature it is evident that detailed accounts from women are needed in order to generate new knowledge around the nature, scope and impacts of unwanted sexual attention, especially for groups of British women. Here, we analyze how this attention is managed, the safety strategies adopted and consider whether those responses contribute toward gender performances that are contradictory and dilemmatic. We also aim to answer whether, within sexualized night-time spaces, moments can be afforded for the reframing of gender relations.

## **Methodology**

This article draws on research developed from collaboration between the authors and the then Liverpool, England, CitySafe Crime Reduction Partnership. The collaboration involved the development of a prevention campaign following reports from Merseyside police that unwanted sexual touching, perpetrated by young men against women, in city center drinking venues was increasingly coming to the attention of the force. Although the

campaign and its findings do not feature in this analysis, for the purpose of contextualizing methodological decisions, it is briefly outlined.

The campaign aimed to clarify that under English and Welsh law, grabbing, groping, pinching and fondling someone without their consent constitutes sexual assault and in turn, to reduce and prevent these offenses. The campaign targeted male students and NTE users aged 18-24, a demographic found to perpetrate more sexual offenses, as well as female victims of sex crime frequently falling within this age bracket (UUK, 2016). It also captured the demographic profile of those attending the Liverpool-based bars and clubs where unwanted incidents were purportedly happening. The campaign consisted of posters placed in male toilets (restrooms) in city center NTE venues, including the city's universities' Student Unions. The campaign poster incorporated two designs, one with the strap-line: "It was only a grope. There's no excuse. Don't grab, grope, pinch, fondle. This is sexual assault which is a serious crime" and a second where the prefixed "It was only a grope" was replaced with "It was only a bit of fun." While the NTE is not homogenous, with there being much variation in the type of venue within it (and the norms associated with venues), the campaign ran in youth-focused, heterosexual, mainstream bar and nightclub establishments. These were the venues coming to the attention of Merseyside police and which wider evidence indicates are more often associated with unwanted sexual encounters (Home Office, 2008; Hutton, 2004).

Liverpool's population is estimated to be 466,415 with a wider city region of 1,507,000 residents (Liverpool City Council, 2011). The population is a young one with 30.7% of individuals being aged under 25 (Liverpool City Council, 2011). The city has a large and expanding student population which plays a key role in its youthful profile. Four universities are based within and around the Liverpool area. Liverpool is renowned for its active and diverse NTE scene, which while playing a central role in the city's regeneration has brought

disproportionately high levels of alcohol-related crime and hospital admissions, when compared to other English cities (Anderson, Hughes, & Bellis, 2007).

Due to the exploratory nature of this research and focus on subjective, situated experience, an inductive, qualitative approach was adopted. Fundamental to knowledge production is self-reflexivity (Hesse-Biber, 2012), allowing the researcher to become cognizant of how their standpoint plays into the research endeavor. As the first and primary author of this article, I acknowledge that my position as a white, middle-class feminist - albeit one that recognizes the interconnections between racism, sexism, heterosexism and class - and who believes that emotions are central to knowledge building (Hemmings, 2012), has shaped this work. My identity has informed the research questions posed, the methods adopted and the interpretation of data. A marker of the rigor of this work is in acknowledging my values and subjectivities and practicing strong reflexivity throughout the research process.

A series of focus groups were conducted in March 2015 to explore perspectives toward the campaign, but more broadly, to generate data about experiences of unwanted sexual behaviors in the NTE. In light of the campaign having targeted young men, this was the primary group recruited. However, 31 women students also participated and it is these data the current analysis examines. In line with an interpretivist approach, the sample had to be small in order to generate nuanced in-depth insights which could foster theoretical development (Kovac & Trussell, 2015). Four single-sex focus groups were conducted by a young, white, female lecturer at the university from which students were recruited. Running groups comprised of women was premised on findings that group homogeneity facilitates a sense of ease which in turn encourages disclosures (Greenwood, Ellmers, & Holley, 2014). Participation was incentivized by offer of a £20 gift voucher and ethical approval was granted by the institution used to recruit students from.

A non-probability sample of women studying for a law degree within one specific university in Liverpool were emailed and invited to participate in the research using a university-level email distribution list to do so. The invitation stated that the study was examining 18-24 year olds' experiences and understandings of unwanted sexual touching when in the NTE. This transparency was necessary for ethical purpose. However, it may have resulted in the recruitment of participants with a greater interest in the issues or experience of them (Hoover & Morrow, 2015). While the sample is not representative of all women students, and the subjective, situated realities of women's lives problematizes notions of what representativeness means, as the analysis indicates, it captured those with lived experience - from whom detailed insight and theory can be developed (Hesse-Biber, 2012).

The majority of participants recruited were heterosexual and white. Although the latter reflected the makeup of the institution used to recruit participants from (10.1% of undergraduates were from a black and minority ethnic group, OFFA, 2017),<sup>2</sup> the lack of diversity is acknowledged. The safety strategies adopted by our participants, for example, may be ones that are more available to young, white women. While we did not collect explicit measures of class from our sample, the university from which students were recruited has a history of attracting individuals from "disadvantaged" financial backgrounds (OFFA, 2017). In 2015/16, 95.26% of its undergraduates were from the UK and of these students, 97.7% had attended a state school with 50% being from lower income backgrounds (HESA, 2017; OFFA, 2017). It is therefore likely that the sample captured the views of middle and working-class students.

Focus groups were held on campus in private study rooms and lasted for an average of 55 minutes. Participants were asked about their motivations for going out, where they went out to, their experiences of the NTE and their views toward the prevention campaign. Specific questions asked about participants' experiences of unwanted sexual touching when

out. However, this issue was raised for debate in each group prior to those questions being posed. That is, the need to navigate unwanted behaviors was automatically discussed alongside participants' descriptions of where they went out to. This perhaps speaks to the centrality of unwanted experiences on nights out. Once participants had raised this topic follow-up questions probed the frequency of those behaviors, how incidents were managed, their impact and whether reported. Participants discussed experiences that extended well beyond physical touching and in this sense women defined for themselves the range of physical and non-physical behaviors that were perceived to constitute unwanted.

Focus groups were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim by a professional transcribing company immediately after being conducted. This allowed the authors to identify lines of enquiry relevant to emergent theory which were pursued in subsequent groups. Transcripts were read and coded using the analysis software NVivo, initially by the first author and then verified for accuracy with the second. During the open coding phase (Strauss & Corbin, 1990), concepts and categories were allowed to organically emerge from the data. Following the development of a set of coded themes and categories, transcripts were re-read to ensure that the codes represented participants' views and to structure them in accordance to their relationships. Selective coding allowed for more detailed analysis of gender performance and its applicability to unwanted sexual attention. Here, theory was refined and connections between codes enhanced. The overarching themes and accompanying lower order themes that emerged from this process are outlined in table 1.

[Insert table 1 here]

## **Study Findings**

### **Nights Out on the Town**

This theme consisted of two lower-order themes: “motivations for going out at night” and “the persistent presence of unwanted attention.” The former captures the reasons for visiting licensed venues while the latter considers the pervasive nature of unwanted encounters.

### **Motivations for going out at night.**

Participants’ motivations for going out at night often linked to sexual attention becoming unwanted. Women argued that they went out to “get drunk and let off a bit of steam (Focus Group 2, hereafter FG2)”, to “dance and have a laugh (FG3)”, “as a distraction from doing my work (FG4)” and “to socialize and go out with my friends (FG2).” These narratives emphasize the appeal of the liminality of night-time leisure, the opportunity for “play” and to find concerted “time out” within a schedule of work and study (Fileborn, 2016; Hobbs et al., 2003; Snow et al., 1991). Consumption is therefore not just about the purchase of products but is also premised on an opportunity for emotional experience and release. That is, time spent in club and bar spaces can offer a form of “experiential consuming” where the material is not taken home, beyond the memories created during the evening (Malbon, 1999, p. 20).

A minority of participants reported going out for the purpose of “hooking up”, others were selectively interested or indifferent to this idea while a majority argued that evenings out were about prioritizing fun with friends: “...we just want to dance. We like cocktails, um, no one’s looking for anything, you know, love interests or anything and we just want to dance... (FG1).”<sup>3</sup> Participants were more skeptical about male intention, drawing on essentialist narratives to argue that men went out to pick-up women and “to get in my pants (FG2).” This perceived clash of intentions linked to behaviors being perceived as or becoming unwanted. Namely, male sexual attention and the energies invested in navigating it

impinged on time with friends, having fun and disengaging from the stress of the working week.

### **The persistent presence of unwanted attention.**

The nature of unwanted sexual attention was complex and multifarious with actions being differentiated, certain behaviors being perceived more acceptable than others and reactions varying. What was clear, however, was that some form of “touching, slapping and, like, just grinding on you... (FG2)” or “comments about people’s chest and tits (FG3)” were considered an unavoidable part of nightlife: “If you’re going, like, out clubbing or something, you, kind of, like, sort of, like, expect to be touched (FG1).” Such behaviors were recalled by all participants, were constructed as ubiquitous, occurred “every night, every time (FG4)” a woman went out and had to be constantly navigated and struggled with (Christmas & Seymour, 2014; Drinkaware, 2016; Fileborn, 2012; Graham et al., 2017; Kavanaugh, 2013).

The expectation that unwanted attention would impinge on the night linked to bar and club environments being viewed as spaces where sexual interactions commenced and which people went to for that purpose. The promise of sex, offered within the sexual marketplace of bars and clubs (Grazian, 2007; Nicholls, 2018), was not lost on participants. A by-product of this dynamic was assumed to be some form of touching or verbalized harassment:

It is weird that we accept it as the norm. Like you said, if you just grabbed somebody’s bum or try and touch someone’s boob in a club, if you just walked in a room in uni and someone just grabbed your boob, that would be so wrong, but because it’s in that... [bar space] (FG2).

The dichotomy between “safe” daytime space and “risky” night-time environment that is invoked here is arguably not as stark in reality. Rooms within universities do pose risks for



women and sexual offenses within those spaces have long been tolerated (UUK, 2016, 2017, 2018). Similarly, the NTE is heavily regulated, governed by a set of formal and informal controls despite the majority of participants' describing it as relatively "rule-less". Christmas and Seymour (2014, p. 77) argue that altered "boundaries" and "norms" characterize mainstream licensed venues, arrangements that have been carefully curated to attract customers through the allure of the "edgy", the carnivalesque and potential for transgression (Hobbs et al., 2003, 2005; Kavanaugh, 2013; Malbon, 1999). As Haydock (2016, p. 1057) has argued, while drawing on Bakhtin's (1984) work, the carnival is the world turned "inside out" where the restrictions that govern the day are loosened, hierarchical world views put to one side and where "everything" is permitted. Key features of carnival include "profane speech", "grotesque realism" with a focus on the body, its "natural features and functions" including sex - characteristics evident in the above participant's account. Thus, while it is not the case that unwanted sexual behaviors are the reserve of night-time venues, as part of the manufacturing of transgression they commodify gender difference and heighten the perception that women's bodies are publically available. This creates fertile ground for unwanted encounters and consolidates normative power relations: a point to which we return.

### **Overarching Forms of Unwanted Sexual Attention**

Although by no means clear-cut and linear, unwanted sexual attention fell into two overarching forms, each of which were developed into a lower-order sub-theme. The first, "the pick-up routine", included behaviors that men used to start sexual encounters. The second, "showing off for the lads", included behaviors severed from any real attempt to get to know the woman and which were premised instead on mobilizing hegemonic masculinity.

#### **The pick-up routine.**

Participants talked about an array of pick-up strategies that men would deploy. These ranged from “if you’re up dancing on the dance floor, they’ll go up right behind you (FG2)”, more subtle attempts at showing interest via “winning round your friends (FG3)” and through the direction of the conversation: “...someone comes up, like, saying the most nice and normal thing, like, oh, so where do you come from, but you know that they don’t actually care... [It’s about] their end game... (FG1).” The point at which these behaviors became unwanted was considered a “blurry line (FG1)” that differed across participants. However, key features included if the woman was not looking to pursue a sexual interaction, or if she was, feeling she was one in a list of women being indiscriminately approached for the purpose of sex. One participant described her reaction to being approached by a stranger:

...I’m not the type of person to get with anyone, but at the same time... because he was quite a good looking guy, so it kind of makes you feel a bit attracted. But then when you realize he was literally doing that to everyone, trying to just get lucky... (FG3).

This example highlights the fine line that can exist between sexual attention possibly being wanted and then subsequently not. It resonates with Griffin et al.’s. (2012, p. 193) work and the distinction her participants draw between sexual attention from “random” intoxicated male strangers that might be considered acceptable and attention from less attractive “pervs” that is viewed as unwanted and potentially risky. For the current participant, both scenarios are wrapped up within a single encounter suggesting that unwanted attention may not always be so easily delineated. The example also problematizes the idea that young women enjoy male attention, especially if that man is attractive (Kovac & Trussell, 2015). While such attention may spark sexual interest, this can soon be replaced with anxiety and frustration.

Over two-thirds of the sample argued that sexual attention became unwanted if it was too persistent and in turn, threatening. The latter often linked to a man’s failure to take

seriously what had been verbalized. For example, continued attempts to communicate despite having expressed her non-interest: “I think after someone’s made it obvious that they’re not interested, then... so often guys, they don’t take the hint and they don’t care, and they’ll just carry on, carry on, carry on (FG1).” Men’s inability “to listen to young women’s rejections” (Griffin et al., 2012, p. 193; Kavanaugh, 2013) is well highlighted, with this inability often being blamed on men’s intoxication, as opposed to their individual agency (Christmas & Seymour, 2014; Fileborn, 2012). In the current context, “not listening” also tied to the carnivalesque nature of NTE spaces and as discussed, a perceived ability to capitalize upon the transgressive norms of licensed venues. As we come on to discuss, ending unwanted attention that occurred under the umbrella of a pick-up involved a careful process of managing men’s emotions.

### **Showing off for the lads.**

Sexual attention that was divorced from any attempt to pick-up the woman, that was instead “done for your reaction (FG2)” and to act as bravado amongst a male friendship group, was the second overarching form of unwanted attention identified (Kavanaugh, 2013). The behaviors that fell within this category were experienced as routine and included participants being lifted up in venues by strangers, having their “arse grabbed” by someone on the dancefloor who then refused to acknowledge the action, strangers that “pulled my top down (FG2)” as well as multiple stories of men putting their hand up women’s skirts: “My mate... she was in [name of nightclub] and someone actually put their hand up her skirt, in her knickers and, like stuck their fingers up her... (FG2).”

These behaviors<sup>4</sup> were more carnivalesque in content compared to those associated with the pick-up routine, personifying the “boisterous” spirit of carnival, connecting the body to the world and at an affective level, helping to create a sense of unity (Bakhtin, 1984).

Paradoxically, however, the frequency with which such behaviors occur at work, on the streets and in other public domains situates them as simultaneously carnivalesque and mundane (Latcheva, 2017; Miller, 2008; Vera-Gray, 2018). Grazian (2007) describes them as performative “girl hunt” rituals whereby men objectify women in order to solidify homosocial bonds, reinforce heterosexual identity and enable friends to assist in the mobilizing of (hegemonic) masculinity (Connell, 1987; Kavanaugh, 2013). Sexual competitiveness, camaraderie within the process and rejections from women all serve as humor, energize the group and cement friendship bonds. Thus, the performance of masculinity does not necessitate attracting a sexual partner. What counts is participating, enthusiastically, in the related rituals.

These dynamics, undoubtedly, reproduce structures of gender inequality that operate to objectify (and sexually abuse) women and maintain male dominance (Grazian, 2007; Kavanaugh, 2013). The actions of pulling a top down and putting a hand up a skirt were perceived by all participants to be overtly invasive and crossed a boundary that even in an environment where people attempt to find sexual partners, should not be tolerated. With regard to having one’s bum pinched, there was typically a greater ability to “just ignore it (FG3).” While this response may link to the routine trivialization of unwanted attention by venue staff and a belief that it had to be managed informally (as we come on to discuss), it also tied to the frequency of such encounters and a commitment to “deal with them (FG2).” Indeed, such behaviors were not considered “normal” or acceptable, despite there being a reluctant acceptance of this reflecting the status quo. Thus, having one’s bum pinched made women angry and could result in overt retaliatory responses (as will be discussed), but equally, over half of the sample reported making determined efforts to “ignore” the behavior so as not to ruin their night:

I don't think it affects me that much because...it's an issue that does make me angry, but it's very much a case of, like, I can brush it off and get rid of it and ignore it and carry on having fun... (FG1).

Multiple participants argued: "...you've got more things as well to think about on a night out, I think, you don't really want to let things ruin your night... (FG2)." Rather than women necessarily reducing their experiences of sexual victimization "down to nothing" (Fileborn, 2012; Graham., 2017; Kelly & Radford, 1990), here, they seemed to be making exerted efforts to prioritize participation and not allow unwanted encounters to define the evening. Indeed, the former perspective implies that women respond similarly to all unwanted experiences: our analysis did not support this conclusion. Women's responses were multiple and could be more overt.

### **Strategies for Managing Risk**

Both forms of unwanted sexual attention could produce a sense of "disgust", "scare" women and put them "on guard." However, strategies for managing these risks were plentiful.<sup>5</sup> Here, we consider those strategies and how the behaviors associated with each underpinned performances of femininity. Four lower-order themes of "emotion management", "men as protector", "from individualism to camaraderie amongst the girls" and "feisty femininity" emerged.

#### **Emotion management.**

Multiple women emphasized the difficulties of ending an interaction that occurred in the context of a pick-up routine and the process of emotion management inherent within it: "...you feel like a bitch saying, oh, I'm not interested, because then they can turn round and be...it's a bit, kind of...you feel a bit harsh (FG2)." While responses to ending encounters

were varied, with some women “not being bothered” about the approach adopted, over half reported offering “a massive explanation” that justified their lack of interest. These responses were constructed in complex, emotionally invested ways that were diplomatic, tactful or “as nice as you can (FG1).” Thus, in order to manage this form of attention women commodified their feelings, surface acted and performed emphasized femininities, so as to accommodate threats to male ego (Connell, 1987; Fileborn, 2012; Hochschild, 1983; Snow et al., 1991). Despite this investment participants reported “being abused after that... I’ve had people say, oh, I didn’t really like you anyway, you fat bitch (FG3).” Other women reported being called “a slag” or “a tease” when they expressed non-interest. Responses that had a significant impact:

That’s what affects me more than if someone slapped my bum, like, whatever. But if someone turns around and is absolutely horrible to me, that’ll make me feel like shit for the rest of the night. That’ll affect me a lot more... (FG1).

Verbal insults were often argued to be “as bad as having someone touch you (FG2)”, views that problematize legal responses that fail to protect against one-off instances of verbalized harassment (Fileborn, 2012). Comparable reactions are noted in the literature when women reject men’s advances (Graham et al., 2017; Kovac & Trussell, 2015; Snow et al., 1991). However, what is uniquely argued here is that the “massive explanation” and associated performance of emphasized femininity appeared to be utilized to (unsuccessfully) mitigate the negative outcome associated with rejection, rather than being indicative of women using indirect rejections to avoid causing offense (Powell, 2010). Thus, there appeared to be (subtle) strategy, as opposed to passivity, associated with these responses.

These delicate explanations could arguably be viewed as a safety strategy that women use in order to navigate the dilemmatic nature of femininity (Brooks, 2011; Griffin et al.,

2012) and to protect oneself from offensive remarks, despite this outcome not always being achieved. Women who experienced hostile responses described feeling like “you can’t win, ever (FG1)” or “you can’t win either way (FG3).” Women found themselves situated as liminal subjects within a liminal space: dammed for communicating non-interest (diplomatically) and simultaneously dammed if they did not for supposedly having led a man on. These experiences speak directly to femininity within the context of the NTE being a difficult if not impossible space to inhabit (Griffin et al., 2012). The emotional work inherent in these negotiations impacts parity of participation (Fraser, 2008) and the ability to disengage from the stress of the working week (Hobbs et al., 2003).

### **Men as protector.**

Men were situated as central to the problem of unwanted sexual attention but also pivotal to its resolution (Nicholls, 2018; Snow et al., 1991). Namely, the presence of a boyfriend or male friend was argued by most to reduce the likelihood of an unwanted encounter: “I like going out with my boyfriend because I think you don’t really get approached as much if you’re with... a lad (FG1).” In certain instances, the metaphorical presence of a man, in the embodiment of an engagement ring, was sufficient:

I’ve noticed a big change... because I’m engaged and obviously I wear an engagement ring. And so I know that when they notice my ring, that’s when they disappear. And I don’t even have to say anything... And it does make me feel safer because I use it as a weapon and I just make it obvious... (FG3).

In order to circumvent unwanted attention women set firm boundaries by referring to a boyfriend at the start of an interaction. A minority also reported lying about having a boyfriend in order to defuse male persistence: “Like if they’ve been persistent, I’ve had to, like, lie to people and say I’ve got a boyfriend (FG1).” Hence, in order to manage unwanted

encounters these examples see women perform aspects of traditional femininity whereby they position themselves as in need of the protection of men. Using an engagement ring or boyfriend to deflect unwanted attention could, however, be viewed as a further safety strategy that women adopt on nights out. Nevertheless, far from being a “peaceful and effective method of rejection” (Passananti, 2015, n.p.), backlash could ensue: “...I’ll say, oh no, sorry, I’ve got a boyfriend. And straightaway, I find that he might go from being the most charming guy in the world to being a complete arsehole, and go fuck you then (FG3).” Despite men often being situated as a guarantee of women’s safety (Christmas & Seymour, 2014; Fileborn, 2016; Griffin et al., 2012), these findings indicate that this is not inevitably the case.

Using a boyfriend and an associated performance of traditional femininity to justify a lack of sexual interest has been critiqued on the grounds that it reinforces male privilege, removes a woman’s agency and implicates that being single warrants harassment (Passananti, 2015; Snow et al., 1991). The regularity of the response encourages its replication and the continued renewing of female dependency (Grazian, 2007; Kavanaugh, 2013). However, the boundary-management system of saying “no” or “I’m not interested” breaks down in the context of drunken nights out (Christmas & Seymour, 2014). That is, due to the transgressive norms associated with youth-focused NTE spaces, a “no” needs to be backed up by the intervention of friends, or, in this instance, a (mythical) male. Participants were not uncritical of using this justification, arguing that they “hated” doing it. Nevertheless, it was often considered necessary to continue to enjoy the night. We would argue that rather than focusing on what women should say in the deflection of male attention, focus should hinge on venues holding accountable those who sexually harass and offend on their premises.

### **From individualism to camaraderie amongst the girls.**



Other strategies adopted in response to unwanted attention saw a move away from reliance on men and toward more individualist, person-centric approaches. For example, cutting an evening short and going home, reducing the amount one drank, avoiding certain venues and leaving venues entirely “because people are hounding you (FG1).” Women also strategically laughed unwanted attention off (Snow et al., 1991) in order to avoid the “drama” that could otherwise occur. Responses often developed as a consequence of having “learned” the terrain of night-time spaces and acquiring an associated competence in “how to handle” nights out. Here, participants could responsabilize other women by expecting them to also know “how to look after themselves (FG1).” For example, women could judge the “hypersexual feminine look” (Griffin et al., 2012, p. 186; Miller, 2008; Nicholls, 2018) that others adopted and were critical of this over performance of femininity which was seen to enhance risk. However, participants also recognized the problems inherent in their judgment and enjoyed the wearing of “sexy” outfits themselves. Here then, tensions emerged in relation to what was perceived appropriate and overly excessive femininity on nights out (Nicholls, 2018).

Although a neoliberal, individualized agenda was evident within accounts, in the majority, looking after one’s safety in the NTE was viewed as a responsibility to be shared (Brooks, 2011, 2014; Fileborn, 2016; Sheard, 2011). It was frequently argued: “We, kind of, all just keep an eye on each other. It’s like an unspoken rule sort of thing where you’ve got to, like, guard everyone else... (FG1).” Remaining vigilant to vulnerable strangers was also evident:

I was out the other week and there was this girl, and she was really drunk. And there was this guy and he was all over, like, trying to kiss her... so like me and my friend went over and was like... pretending we knew her, like to help her get away. And she was like, thanks, because she’d lost her friends and he just wouldn’t leave her (FG4).

Participants reported getting angry at witnessing men exploit drunk women: "...she was obviously off her face... they were all like, taking it in turns to get off with her while she was, like unconscious... it's just like pure molestation... I was, like, so angry by it (FG1)." It may be this anger that produces the affective bodily experience necessary to "move" an onlooker to intervene. Lewis, Marine and Kenney (2018) argue that anger is a force for collective action, particularly important for motivating change related to sexual violence. Hemmings (2012), in theorizing the possibility of feminist social transformation, similarly argues that "affective solidarities" are a prerequisite to that change and such solidarities are produced through "affective dissonance." That is, shared experiences of discomfort produced via affects including frustration, rage and the desire for connection. Indeed, rather than othering this drunk woman for failing to perform respectable femininity, a galvanizing spirit emerged where onlookers collectively developed strategies to mitigate the risks she faced.

Women's informal strategies for dealing with unwanted attention are especially important, typically because more formal lines of recourse remained unavailable. There was a shared reticence to report unwanted incidents to venue staff or the police. There was a strong sense that any report would be "laughed at", "shrugged off" and that "no one would care (FG2)" due to the perceived normality of such practices: "...It's just dismissed. It's like, it's a night out, get over it, cheer up and have a smile love... as if I should be happy that... or I should be proud that people are hitting on me (FG3)." Thus, the lack of formal sanction for such behaviors could arguably play a role in their maintenance (Fileborn, 2016). Our participants attempted to fill this gap by taking it upon themselves to monitor friends and strangers.

### **Feisty femininity.**

Experiencing unwanted sexual attention that was aimed at showing off for the lads could make participants angry and produce overt retaliatory responses. This contrasts sharply with the approach of trying to defuse the backlash of a rejection via diplomatic justifications: “...It scares me when I go out, if someone touches me, I’ve got, like proper anger issues, so I will, like, turn around and hit them... (FG1).” Other participants who had been touched or who had witnessed friends being harassed similarly reported not being prepared to “just stand back (FG2).” In response they had “gone really, really mad (FG2)” at perpetrators by “turning around and being, like, back off (FG1)”, telling men to “fuck off (FG4)” or getting oneself “into murder all the time, I’m known as a miserable bitch because I’m always like, this is unacceptable (FG3).” Typically, these responses were described as instinctive and stemmed from a sense of humiliation, feeling invaded and frustrated. Such actions were infrequently regretted and often came with a sense of entitlement to respond in such a way after boundaries had been so overtly disrespected:

And this boy just, it really hurt as well, like, literally slapped my bum. And I just turned around – I was quite drunk, so I was really angry – I was, like, who do you think you are, what right do you have to touch my body? It angers me so much (FG2).

These responses highlight that for a significant minority of women unwanted sexual attention was directly and overtly challenged (Graham et al., 2017; Kavanaugh, 2013; Snow et al., 1991). Other women reported or relayed stories of friends who more strategically tried to subvert such attention. For example, by “doing it back to them (FG4).” In one focus group an incident was discussed where a friend would parody the behavior of offending men in a seeming attempt to reinstate gender order:

She's a bit of a freak, but, um, so she gets it quite a lot [unwanted attention]. And she's, like, you know, fuck it... so she then walks up behind groups of people, just lads, pinches their bum and just turns away and carries on dancing and stuff... (FG4).

Although such actions cannot inevitably be divorced from post-feminist calls to be assertively sexual (McRobbie, 2009), such a response, including the verbal responses discussed, both complement and contrast with the dominant femininities theorized in the NTE. That is, femininities that are “sassy” and independent (but not feminist), that are agentically sexy and “classy” but never “sluttish” or “trashy” (Atkinson and Sumnall, 2016; Bailey et al., 2015; Griffin et al., 2012; Kovac & Trussell, 2015; McRobbie, 2007, 2009). Some of our participants’ assertive, feisty behaviors could arguably be regarded as “sassy” and independent, but equally, embracing feminist undertones by speaking back to sexism and refusing to complement hegemonic masculinity in a relation of subordination. Such “feisty femininity” would fit within Connell’s (1987) account of resistant femininities. Namely, those premised on behaviors of non-compliance with male domination that enable women, even if temporarily, to challenge oppressive power structures and experiment with an expanded construction of the feminine ideal (Kovac & Trussell, 2015).

The opportunities for articulating and strengthening such resistance, in new, youthful, determined and collective ways may never have been more opportune. The global naming of those who have been complicit in the perpetration of rape and harassment, across entertainment and religious contexts, and the existence of activism in order to challenge violence against women (Lewis et al., 2018; Marine & Lewis, 2014), may indicate that cultural and ideological support to remain compliant is weakening. There is no reason to assume that such resistance, or acts of feisty femininity, are restricted to British women. The re-emergence of feminism on campus and beyond has been extensive and especially evident within the US and Europe (see Lewis et al., 2018; Marine & Lewis, 2014). It therefore makes

sense to harness this potential as part of the wider strategy for ending violence against women, including the violence enacted in bar and club spaces.

For some participants, resistant behaviors appeared to have been enabled by alcohol, allowing women to do and “say things you wouldn’t say to male strangers in the street” (Griffin et al., 2012, p. 191). Reduced inhibitions afforded certain women the ability to express their frustration. However, as argued, such responses were not blamed on alcohol per se and were infrequently regretted. Again, within the context of group discussion these behaviors, which could be constructed as non-respectable and unfeminine, were typically commended, even if considered unconventional or “freakish.” This finding sits in contrast to Fileborn’s (2012) whose work with Australian women found that aggressive responses to unwanted incidents were viewed negatively by other women and as potentially escalating a situation. Here, however, perhaps due to the different cultural context and recent attuning of UK students to issues of sexism on campus (Lewis et al., 2018; UUK, 2016), different findings emerge. Perhaps then, for certain groups of women, in the midst of intensities such as anger, frustration and a shared recognition of the harm and exclusion that accompanies unwanted sexual attention, moments are afforded for the emergence of affective solidarities (Hemmings, 2012) and the transformation of traditional gendered relations. Rather than alcohol allowing young women the opportunity to engage in “fantastically fun” aspects of unfeminine behavior (Griffin et al., 2012, p. 191), it also, in certain circumstances, enables opportunities for “fantastically feisty” behaviors where those actions are not sanctioned, judged unfeminine or deemed likely to exacerbate victimization.

## **Conclusion**

This research has advanced knowledge around the scope and content of unwanted sexual attention, including a group of British women’s responses to it. We identified that this

attention takes on different guises during nights out. Certain unwanted behaviors stem from men's attempts to find sexual partners while others stem from attempts to solidify homosocial bonds. The latter is more reflective of the carnival and inequality that surround nightlife, aimed at eliciting a reaction, rather than attracting a partner. Women's responses to these encounters were complex and multifarious but substantial energy - and strategy - was invested in navigating them. While participants did find the means to negotiate their evenings, through adopting a range of safety strategies at the individual and collective level, these did not inevitably minimize the potential for unwanted encounters. Indeed, their enactment could precipitate them. We argue that it is the behaviors associated with these safety responses that play a key role in the production of femininities that are contradictory and dilemmatic. We identified unique ways gender was "done" in relation to safety, from the performance of emphasized and traditional femininities that constructed diplomatic rejection responses and used mythical boyfriends to offer protection, through to an overtly resistant form underpinned by acts of non-compliance which we term "feisty femininity." This conceptual development makes visible a form of femininity that speaks back to unwanted attention, highlights clear moments for the reframing of gender relations and offers scholars an additional lens through which to theorize gender performance. These findings reiterate the situationally specific nature of femininity, not only across and within contexts, but also in relation to the strategies used to manage gendered risks.

While authors have argued that education must encourage young people "to stop tolerating sexual harassment and molestation" (Christmas & Seymour, 2014, p. 10), our data does not suggest that these behaviors are tolerated and we are keen to problematize the notion of "normalized". While unwanted attention is ubiquitous, there was wide recognition of its problematic nature, feelings of anger, annoyance, upset and examples of incidents being overtly and diplomatically challenged. Although certain behaviors could be "brushed off",

this was not synonymous with them being considered acceptable or “normal.” Instead, active decisions were made to participate in nights out and not allow unwanted attention to define an evening. Instructing young people not to tolerate unwanted attention fails to recognize its complex and insidious impacts and problematically responsabilizes individual victims. Not tolerating incidents may involve women explicitly telling men that they are not sexually interested in them. However, as noted, this can expose her to backlash, the impacts of which may be more profound than the initial incident.

Our participants did not feel able to seek recourse through venues and safety strategies developed in order to fill this gap. Thus, we argue that reducing the impunity associated with the perpetration of unwanted behaviors must be a key starting point in efforts geared toward prevention and venues must play an active role in this process. We recognize the challenges, not least reconciling the suggestion within governance structures that manufacture and benefit from a “transgressive ambience” (Hobbs et al., 2005, p. 93). We acknowledge the need for overhaul of the NTE leisure industry if harm is to be addressed (Taylor, Gosling, Smith, Gunby, & Carline, 2019). However, in the interim, and as part of initiating this process, establishments must be pressured into “not tolerating” the sexual harassment that occurs on their premises. This is not an issue for venues to respond to in isolation and wider focus on changing the behaviors of perpetrators is also required. As we have argued previously, there must be a multi-pronged approach to addressing sexual violence with work in the NTE complementing and extending other forms of governance (Carline et al., 2018; Gunby et al., 2017).

A multi-pronged approach fits well with the current agenda of Universities UK (UUK), the organization representing Higher Education institutions across the UK, in their efforts to combat sexual misconduct on campus (UUK, 2016, 2018). Accordingly, consent workshops, bystander interventions, zero-tolerance policies, behavioral obligations and centralized

reporting mechanisms have been introduced across a number of universities (UUK, 2017, 2018). A minority of which have developed responses in collaboration with local bars and nightclubs and/or other agencies (UUK, 2017, 2018). Backed by certain universities, students have called for, and NTE venues have housed, prevention campaigns that highlight harmful sexual behaviors (Gunby et al., 2017). Similarly, students want to see developed public lists which identify “safe” venues that take unwanted encounters seriously (Young-Powell, 2013). The commercial incentive to make it onto such a list, especially when endorsed by universities and their students, may provide the impetus needed to initiate appropriate responses. Such collaborations help to ensure that cultural change is not only confined to the campus but permeates into those other arenas where young people spend their leisure time. The implementation of these approaches is in its infancy in the UK and further work and evaluation is needed. For example, UK bystander intervention programs have been based on US data, despite a lack of evidence around the factors that facilitate (or inhibit) bystanders from intervening and the inevitable cultural distinctions (Labhardt, Holdsworth, Brown, & Howart, 2017). In rolling out responses, as well as ensuring that collaborations with external stakeholders are prioritized, programs on campus must be culturally sensitive and based on a nuanced understanding of the factors that influence harassment and assault.

As discussed, it has become evident in recent years that young people, globally, are starting to demand accountability for sexist structures and norms, partly due to the re-emergence of feminism and activism on campus in the UK, North America and beyond (Lewis et al., 2018; Marine & Lewis, 2014). This demand for accountability is arguably embedded within expressions of feisty femininity. Thus, as part of the multi-pronged approach to preventing gendered violence we encourage the fostering of affective solidarities (Hemmings, 2012), which underpin femininities or feminisms that insist on accountability and which foreground wider feminist social transformation. Lewis et al. (2018) pinpoint the



university as uniquely placed to support this, care of the access to opportunities and resources they provide (including feminist materials, activities and societies, while also fostering critical thinking, curiosity and dissent). Supporting safe expression of feisty femininity, as part of the feminist politics and activism that already occurs on campus is called for, alongside the aforementioned interventions that universities are implementing. While we are not blind to the ways in which market forces and neoliberalism have impacted Higher Education, we would still agree that the academy embodies the possibility of social and political change for its students (Lewis et al., 2018); a possibility to be harnessed in the drive to end gendered violence. In moving forward we would also call for gender scholars to keep feisty femininity, and wider strategies for resisting sexism, at the forefront of academic thinking.

## Footnotes

- <sup>1</sup> We use the term licensed venue to mean a bar, pub or nightclub that has a license to sell alcohol.
- <sup>2</sup> The university from which students were recruited does not publically report on the sexuality of its students.
- <sup>3</sup> See Taylor et al. (2019) for further discussion of women's sexual advances and men's responses to them.
- <sup>4</sup> Which would constitute sexual assault (Section 3, Sexual Offences Act 2003) and assault by penetration (Section 2, Sexual Offences Act 2003) in England and Wales.
- <sup>5</sup> We do not propose that these are the only strategies women use but they were the ones most visible within our data.

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Table 1

*The overarching and lower order themes to emerge from data analysis*

<b>Overarching themes</b>	<b>Lower order themes</b>
Nights on the town	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Motivations for going out at night</li> <li>• The persistent presence of unwanted attention</li> </ul>
Overarching forms of unwanted sexual attention	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The pick-up routine</li> <li>• Showing off for the lads</li> </ul>
Strategies for managing risk	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Emotion management</li> <li>• Men as protector</li> <li>• From individualism to camaraderie amongst the girls</li> <li>• Feisty femininity</li> </ul>